

*A Media Framing Analysis of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman Case*

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**By**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Beth A. Messner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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## Abstract

The George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin case sparked national debate. I have examined the discourse generated by the media surrounding this high-profile case. I have used stories from *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Sun-Times* to understand how the media portrayed George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin during the pre-trial case. I have answered two very important questions surrounding this case. First, in what way did the media frame George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin? Second, what are the implications of this media framing for society as a whole?

After analyzing the articles from these three national newspapers, I discovered the use of episodic, thematic, and partisan media frames. All three frames told the story of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case in different ways. This research paper will encourage people to better understand how the media shapes their world perspective.

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Story telling is a part of human history. In the past, people would use stories to keep a memory alive. This memory had the ability to teach new generations and build traditions. By framing a story, the author decides what aspects receive the most attention. With the emergence of technology, the art of telling a story changed. Technology provided the ability to offer up-to-the minute information and new ways to frame a story. News outlets are under increasing pressure to get the news out the door and into reader's hands as soon as possible to remain competitive. A competitive edge creates relevance and in today's world every deadline is only a nanosecond away.

I provide background information, establish the significance of this case, and define media framing before offering a thorough analysis of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case. The analysis will answer two very important questions surrounding the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman media frenzy. First, in what way did the media frame George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin? Second, what were the implications of this media framing for society as a whole?

### **Background and Significance**

The case is the story of two total strangers whose paths crossed one dark night in Sanford, Florida with tragic results. One was George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old member of the neighborhood watch. The other was Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old teenager on his way home from a store. The story unfolded as follows. Zimmerman was voluntarily patrolling the gated community in which he lived looking for suspicious activity after a recent string of break ins. He encounters



Martin, a person unfamiliar to him, wandering around the neighborhood. Zimmerman calls the police dispatcher and reports a suspicious subject in the neighborhood.

Zimmerman tracks Martin's progress from inside his truck until he loses sight of him.

At this point, George Zimmerman got out of his truck and proceeded to look for Trayvon Martin on foot. (CNN)

While on the phone with his girlfriend, Trayvon Martin realizes he is being followed. At this point an altercation occurs between Martin and Zimmerman. What happened next is solely Zimmerman's account as only he lived to tell the tale. While six eyewitnesses came forward, including one juvenile, everything happened so fast, it was dark, and the bad weather resulted in conflicting accounts of the event. (CBS)

Zimmerman claimed Martin knocked him to the ground with one punch, sat on his chest and began pounding his head on the concrete. Zimmerman, fearing for his life, cried out for help, but no help arrived. Zimmerman reached for the gun on his hip, fired, and ultimately killed Trayvon Martin with a single gunshot wound to the chest. When the police arrived, they took Zimmerman into custody. After questioning him, they let him go. The police were prohibited by Florida's Stand Your Ground Law, which allows a person to use deadly force if they feel their life is danger, from charging Zimmerman with a crime.

Following a public outcry Martin's family and Civil Rights leaders demanded Zimmerman's arrest. A case began to build against Zimmerman. Martin's family attorney Benjamin Crump stated, "As the evidence has continued to unfold, we think there has been a plethora of evidence to simply effect probable cause to do an arrest – not for a conviction, but for an arrest" (CNN). After an open investigation took place,

Zimmerman was arrested and made his first court appearance on April 12, 2012.

Zimmerman received a bond of \$150,000 and apologizes to the family of Trayvon Martin. Fast forward to April 25, 2013; 500 jury summons go out. In ten days, 6 jurors are selected, all of whom are women. The trial itself lasted from June 12, 2013 to June 24, 2013. On June 13, 2013, George Zimmerman was found not guilty of second degree murder by the jury. (CNN)

The high-profile George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin case sparked national debate on such major issues as gun control, race, and stereotyping. This debate will likely reverberate for years to come. Although the tragedy occurred in a moment, the incident transcended time and engaged the nation in a national discourse. There were several special features of this Florida case that made it the center of a media storm.

### **Black Youth and Violence**

The Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman incident that occurred in early 2012 left one teenager dead. By contrast, *The Chicago Tribune* reported that by December 28, 2012, Chicago's "homicide total for the year hit 500, the highest annual total since 2008" (Gorner & Nickeas). Many of these deaths were young men. With increasing violence in Chicago and so many lives lost in Chicago, why did one teenager's life in Florida receive all the attention?

On March 6, 2013 the article *what killed Kennedy and Trayvon?* by Marian Edelman was printed in *The Miami Times*. In the article Edelman stated, "Black boys 15 to 19 years old were 28 times more likely than white boys the same age to be

killed in a gun homicide” (Edelman, 3A). While these numbers are staggering, “the fact is that most Black young people murdered by guns are killed by Black shooters” (Edelman, 3A). Did the racial themes prevalent throughout the media’s reporting of Martin’s killing resonate with a nation already too familiar with cases of black-on-black crime?

### **Civil Rights Leaders**

News of the case reached far across the nation after the involvement of prominent civil rights leaders. CNN reported that one month after the death of Trayvon Martin, the Martin family, Reverend Al Sharpton, Reverend Jesse Jackson, and National Urban League President Marc Morial asked the Sanford City Commission to arrest Zimmerman for the murder of Martin. These leaders also wanted to repeal the ‘Stand Your Ground’ law of Florida because it protected a murderer from facing any charges. (CNN)

When describing the ‘Stand Your Ground’ law, Al Sharpton stated, “the law in effect says based on your imagination – if you imagine I’m a threat – you have the right to kill me” (*The Washington Times*). Civil rights leaders were interviewed by the media and were physically present in many discussions about this case and had a prominent presence at rallies around the country. This presence made these civil rights leaders key opinion leaders in the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case.

## **President Obama**

On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012 the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case arrived on the steps of the White House. President Obama, the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, made his voice heard regarding the case during his nomination of Jim Yong Kim for World Bank President Speech. President Obama stated, “If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon” (whitehouse.gov). This statement also propelled this case to national prominence.

President Obama was not required to speak on this tragedy, but something about the case created an exigence that moved the president to speak. When addressing the Trayvon Martin case, Obama stated, “I think every parent in America should be able to understand why it is absolutely imperative that we investigate every aspect of this and that everybody pulls together” (whitehouse.gov). Obama called on citizens and public officials in the local Florida community where the incident took place and the state and federal to investigate what occurred.

After President Obama concluded addressing the nation and asking them to partake in “soul-searching”, he stated that it is necessary to “examine the laws and the context for what happened as well as the specifics of the incident” (whitehouse.gov). Because only one person lived, the other side of the story and the specifics are difficult to determine. However, one law that received a great deal of attention during this time was Florida’s ‘Stand Your Ground’ law.

## **Stand Your Ground**

Part of the conversation surrounding the case was about the “Stand Your Ground” law. Although Zimmerman was taken into custody after the incident, he was not initially charged; rather he was released from custody after claiming self-defense. However, for Martin’s family and many Civil Rights leaders, this law was the reason Zimmerman walked freely in society. Because of the attention the law received, the conversation elevated to a state level.

“Stand your ground” is better understood by examining the preexisting law in Florida: According to Chapter 776, Justifiable Use of Force, of the 2013 Florida Statutes,

“(1) A person is presumed to have held a reasonable fear of imminent peril of death or great bodily harm to himself or herself or another when using defensive force that is intended or likely to cause death or great bodily harm to another if:

- (a) The person against whom the defensive force was used was in the process of unlawfully and forcefully entering, or had unlawfully and forcibly entered, a dwelling, residence, or occupied vehicle, or if that person had removed or was attempting to remove another against that person’s will from the dwelling, residence, or occupied vehicle; and
- (b) The person who uses defensive force knew or had reason to believe that an unlawful and forcible entry or unlawful and forcible act was occurring or had occurred.”

A small committee of government officials worked behind the scenes to evaluate Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” Law at the time of Trayvon Martin’s killing.

Florida state Senator Chris Smith, according to *The Huffington Post*, stated that “there is a lot of misconception and misunderstanding around the state” about the law and “it did not begin and it will not end with the Trayvon Martin case” (Anderson, 2012).

The “Stand Your Ground” review committee brought together by Senator Smith generated a 21-page statement of recommendations for changes to the law sparked by the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case. This committee formed because of controversies surrounding the use of Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law in this case and others before it.

### **Rallies**

Communities across the nation held rallies and marched in protest of the handling of the case and in support of Trayvon Martin. Young people in particular related to Martin and readily identified with the hoodie he was wearing at the time of his death. One of the many examples of this took place at the University of Texas at Arlington. According to *WFAA*, the *ABC* television station of Dallas, 300 students some dressed in hoodies were present at the rally. Dontae Robison, the president of the NAACP student organization at the UT Arlington stated, “It’s kind of like your clothing can mean that you’re asking for death” (*WFAA*).

*USA Today* reported that the Saturday after George Zimmerman’s acquittal by the Florida jury, thousands came together “in more than 100 cities nationwide to remember Trayvon, to press for federal civil rights charges against the man who shot him, and to attack stand-your-ground self-defense laws” (Jackson). From Detroit, Michigan to Asheville, North Carolina these rallies maintained momentum spanning from March 2012 until July 2013.

The hoodie itself became a national symbol, as rally attendees would wear the hoodie in protest of the verdict and how the case was handled. Even those with celebrity status began voicing their opinions. For example, LeBron James and Dwyane Wade posted pictures of the Miami Heat basketball team dressed in hoodies on social media. Their heads were bowed and they made use of the hashtag #WeAreTrayvonMartin. (ESPN)

Additionally, social media created an online platform for discourse. Every detail of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case was instantly brought to the public through social media. For example, through the hashtag #JusticeForTrayvon, citizens were able to voice their opinions on the Martin killing and Zimmerman verdict. This hashtag created a searchable compilation of content related to the case. (*The Chicago Tribune*). According to *The Chicago Tribune*, “some have replaced their profile photos on Facebook with a black square or silhouettes depicting Trayvon in a hoodie”. The hoodie as an icon reached into the personal and virtual lives of many people.

## Method

How an author frames a story has implications for their audience and the larger society. They decide how the narrative is told, where the emphasis is placed, and place a story into context for a reader.

### Media Framing

*Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* by Erving Goffman (1974) explores frameworks and their relation to society. Goffman states, “When the individual in our Western society recognizes a particular event, he tends, whatever else he does, to imply in this response (and in effect employ) one or more frameworks” (p. 21). A frame is a vehicle to interpret the world around us. The frame “allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms” (p.21). A frame focuses a receiver’s attention on a specific area of concentration that enables us to build their worldviews. (Goffman, 21)

In *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, Paul D’Angelo and Jim Kuypers explain how news frames work through a compilation of other authors’ work. Four analysts’ work provides definitions and new ways to understand a media frame that inform this work. One of these authors is Matthew Nisbet.

Matthew Nisbet (2010) states, “frames simplify complex issues by lending greater importance or weight to certain considerations and arguments over others” (p.47). A media frame assembles an understanding for an audience. This frame constructs a reality “by connecting the mental dots for the public” (Nisbet, 47). By



bringing all the pieces together, a frame presents a specific view of an event. Nisbet refers to sociologist William Gamson and his colleagues who conceptualize that “a frame organizes central ideas on an issue” (Nisbet, 47). By organizing a central idea, there is subjectivity at play because one decides what the central idea is and how to organize it for their audience.

These frames have the ability to enter the public sphere and change an audience’s worldviews. Another author, Claes De Vreese, states, “Public opinion is shaped by how the news media frame issue” (De Vreese, 187). Media framing explains an event in various ways and from multiple angles that influences how the audience thinks about them. De Vreese stated, “News framing implies that political, economic, and social events and issues are presented to citizens as alternative characterizations of a course of action” (p.189). The choices an author makes influences how someone looks at an event in a certain light, altering their mindset on the issue.

In addition, media frames can be embedded in culture. Baldwin Van Gorp explores these culturally embedded frames. Van Gorp argues that journalists use these frames because they are simply ready for use. Journalists know of the “values, narratives and archetypes” (Van Gorp, p. 85) that define our society, thus making frames easy to use to influence an audience. Because these culturally embedded frames are readily at the author’s fingertips, they sometimes are unknowingly using the frames in the news. By using these loaded tools a journalist has the ability to persuade their audience, even in a strictly news report. (Van Gorp)

Media framing can influence how a reader views the world. Jim Kuypers states, “the power of frames subtly induces us to filter our perceptions of the world in particular ways; they make some aspects of our reality more noticeable than other aspects” (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 300). If frames make one idea stand out among the rest, they have the ability to alter worldviews. Kuypers argues, “frames act to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies” (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 301). If a frame engages in any of these acts, it has the ability to persuade an audience and result in real world effects.

## Examples

If people are aware of the media framing that surrounds their lives, there is a better chance they will seek all sides of an issue to find the truth. When media framing and the effects it has on our society are demonstrated through real world examples, the effect it can have becomes a reality. Placing contemporary examples into context allows one to see how damaging media framing can be.

In the essay, *The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy: Media Framing of The Matthew Shepard Murder*, Brian Ott and Eric Aoki use media framing to analyze the coverage of the Matthew Shepard murder. Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson murdered 21 year old Matthew Shepard who was a gay man. In news articles, the term “gay” was used in various headlines. Ott and Aoki (2002) state, “The qualifier ‘gay’ that begins each headline constructs the victim’s sexuality as the focal point of the story, despite Laramie Police Commander O’Dalley’s public claim

at the time that “robbery was the chief motive” (p. 487). The media was able to alter the narrative to create drama.

Ott and Aoki (2002) argued that the media framing of the Matthew Shepard incident lightened the nation’s own guilt. By creating a gap between people and an anti-gay offense, the blame was lifted from their shoulders. The media assisted in easing any guilt for the nation by “shifting from the country’s homophobia to that of the perpetrators, where it was being recoded as a character flaw rather than a wide-scale institutional prejudice” (p.492).

The nation’s guilt was being minimized with every story about the Shepard case. However, this case also was instructive because there was a delay in reporting. The first news articles on the Matthew Shepard case did not emerge in *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, or *Los Angeles Times* until three days after Matthew Shepard was found in the field. Ott and Aoki (2002) argue, “The reason for the media’s delay in treating the story as a national news item likely has to do with how the news is *made*. An event is selected to become a major news story based on its potential for drama” (p.496-487). Without drama to frame a story, this story may have never reached a national level.

The 2006 sexual assault case involving the Duke Lacrosse team is another example of media framing surrounding a tragedy. “Scene, Act, and the Tragic Frame in the Duke Rape Case” printed in the *Southern Communication Journal* by Anna Kimberly Turnage examined the framing of the sexual assault and how the “tragic frame” relieves guilt.

In 2006, the Duke Lacrosse team players were accused of the rape of an African American woman at a party. The players, including the team captain, were portrayed as privileged white men from an elite college who took advantage of an under-privileged black woman. In the days following the accusation, the president of the college fired the team's coach and suspended the lacrosse program for the remainder of the year.

In the end, the players were found not guilty. However, the public was given the power to shed any blame they had in this matter. Turnage (2009) argues that the media framing was "ultimately shaping discourse surrounding the case and clouding the judgments of those involved" (p. 142). In one story, the victims were the men; in the other, the woman was the victim. Because the central issues of this case, such as race, were not brought to the forefront, "it is likely that we can expect another social drama based on those issues to flare up again in the future" (Turnage 2009, 154). As this case indicates, those who create media frames have the ability to decide what issue of a tragedy to look at. In this case the emphasis was placed on details of the incident and not the underlying themes of race.

## **Procedures**

For my analysis of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case, I exclusively used articles published in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Sun-Times* to analyze the media framing of the incident. I chose these papers in particular because of their large reach to viewers, specifically in 2012 when the incident took place. These national newspapers had large total circulation

numbers in comparison to similar national newspapers. According to *The Huffington Post*, *The Chicago Sun-Times* was the eighth-most circulated newspaper in the nation with a total average circulation of 470, 548 in 2012. With a total average circulation of 474,767, *The Washington Post* was the seventh-largest newspaper in 2012. *The New York Times* had the second-highest total average circulation in 2012 with 1,865,318. In addition, the national newspapers I chose allowed me to sample articles from the east coast, west coast, and Midwest.

*The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* were available through the LexisNexis Academic database. Access World News was the database I used to locate *The New York Times*. I used “Trayvon” and “Zimmerman” as key words to search for newspaper articles. These two names were found in hundreds of articles from all three national newspapers.

To narrow down the number of potential articles for analysis, I restricted the time parameters related to the incident and impending trial. I set the dates from when the incident occurred on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012 to Zimmerman’s first appearance in court on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Between these dates the story had just begun. There were multiple articles printed every day with new information on the case. News reporting at this time was most likely to have the greatest impact on the framing of the case.

Based on the time parameters of February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012 to April 12, 2012, I chose twenty-three articles from *The Washington Post*, thirty from *The Chicago-Sun Times*, and fifty-six from *The New York Times*. I chose these articles based on what section of the newspaper the article was printed. I excluded Opinion articles and chose only those articles in the News or A-Section of their respective newspaper.

Once I had decided which articles I would include, I began the analysis process. I read through every article for each newspaper and highlighted any description of the night Trayvon Martin was killed. Then, I examined how Martin and Zimmerman were portrayed. Lastly, I used media frames to determine what themes were repeated throughout the reporting.

### **Analysis**

I have analyzed articles from *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, and *The New York Times* surrounding the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case. When the media covers a story, the author presents that story to the public in his or her own words. Local, national, and international media brought this story to the people. Through my examination of these articles, I have discovered the use of episodic, thematic, and partisan media frames in these articles.

The first articles with reference to the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case appeared in *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Chicago Sun-Times* twenty-three days after the incident on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012. This suggests that the case began as a localized event and gained national attention as the weeks went by.

## Episodic

In the media framing book *Is anyone responsible?*, Shanto Iyengar states, “Framing refers to subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of judgment and choice problems, and the term “framing effects” refers to changes in decision outcomes resulting from these alterations” (Iyengar, 11). By employing a frame, the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case is altered to fit their narrative.

Shanto Iyengar argues that two media frames, “episodic” and “thematic,” have been used by media “in covering a wide range of issues, including crime, terrorism, poverty, unemployment, and racial inequality” (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 160). Episodic frames make “good pictures” and focus on “public issues in terms of concrete instances” (Iyengar, 14).

Episodic frames were used throughout *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Sun-Times* during the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. A vivid depiction of the night Trayvon Martin was murdered by George Zimmerman is delivered to the reader through an episodic frame. The narrative is told in a dramatic way that not only draws the audience in but also creates a sense of investment. The reader is captivated by the drama unfolding in these articles and they continue to read because their attention has been grabbed.

For example, the very first article *The Washington Post* printed on the case called the incident a “slaying of an unarmed black Florida teenager” (Somashckhar). Without a doubt, this line highlights race and tragedy. On March 24, 2012 *The New York Times* stated, “unarmed black teenager shot and killed a month ago in Florida” (Calmes & Cooper). *The Chicago Sun-Times* reported George Zimmerman “could

get life in prison if convicted in the slaying of the unarmed black teenager”

(Farrington & Fineout). These common themes in the case and the surrounding media tell the story from a framed perspective. If Trayvon Martin were white, would the article read, “slaying of an unarmed white Florida teenager” or would “white” be omitted?

The scene is set by *The New York Times* on March 30, 2012 where the reader can imagine themselves there. The author employs the episodic frame by stating, “the civilian shooter, George Zimmerman, ignored a 911 dispatcher’s instructions, tracked the teen he found suspicious, unholstered his gun and fired” (Section A). Zimmerman is viewed as a volunteer watchman and a civilian. The reference to the word “volunteer” discredits his position and undermines any authority he may have. The use of “tracked” and “unholstered” are in place to bring the reader into that tragic night. Through the intricate description the reader is able to envision every detail without physically being there.

The episodic frame found in *The New York Times* article *City Criticizes Police Chief After Shooting* (Alvarez) and *The Chicago Sun-Times* article *What if Trayvon’s killer doesn’t face any charges?* (Chapman) paints George Zimmerman as a “white Hispanic.” In the article *Who is George Zimmerman* printed in *The Washington Post* on March 23, 2012, by Manuel Roig-Franzia, Tom Jackman, and Darryl Fears the reader is provided their first glimpse of who Zimmerman is, with a focus on his past and ethnicity. Described as a Catholic altar boy with a white father and Latina mother, who has black relatives.



Use of the term “white Hispanic” to label Zimmerman places the emphasis on race and the story becomes a black vs. white racially charged issue. The race qualifier for Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman allows the reader to envision what they look like, and through stereotypes how each may have acted in the situation.

## **Thematic**

The Thematic frame is also employed in the reporting of the incident that left Trayvon Martin dead. This frame “places public issues in some more general or abstract context” (Iyengar, 14). Thematic frames work with the big picture, allowing an author to make comparisons between two events regardless of the time between them.

The thematic frame can be seen as the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman incident is placed in a historical context. In *The Washington Post* article *Florida teen’s death awakens a movement*, the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case is compared to the 1960’s, “when getting federal authorities to move quickly was often difficult. But this is a different era, however tragically similar the outcome” (Haygood & Horwitz). The case is framed through a historical background. This can alter a reader’s view on the case and ignite an emotional response. If the reader has a positive or negative connection to the time period referenced, it may cloud their judgment of the incident. When an author places an incident in a historical context, the reader is invited to fill in his or her own conclusions.

In articles from *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago-Sun Times*, the comparison of Trayvon Martin's death to that of Emmet Till also is brought to the surface. By taking Emmet Till's death and relating incident details to Trayvon Martin's death, the theme of systematic racism is invited into the minds of readers. The cultural theme of "victim" is used through a thematic frame to compare these two young black men who lost their lives. Emmet Till, who was murdered at fourteen, was also on his way back from a store, just as Trayvon Martin was. Although black inferiority was a theme in Till's death, the media was able to make the connection between these two young men ultimately creating a larger white vs. black narrative. In a time post-civil rights era, these narratives are still prevalent in telling a story.

### **Partisan**

As defined in the book *Doing News Framing Analysis*, partisan frames "highlight certain information and ideas to present one position (or set of positions) on an issue as being correct and other positions as being wrong" (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 159). A national newspaper author may not seem to pick sides at first glance. However, I argue through this analysis that "Partisan frames" were at play in some of the media coverage of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case

For example, at the beginning of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case, the media portrayed Zimmerman as a much larger "white Hispanic" and Martin as an "unarmed black teenager." I believe that with inclusion of these labels, the media framed the case in line with the popular opinion. Many in the public were demanding justice for Trayvon Martin.

While readers were given only a small amount of background information on George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin is brought to life through these national newspaper articles in various ways. For example, *The Washington Post* stated, “He liked Skittles, which he had just bought from a local store, along with iced tea. He had a girlfriend. And his dream has been ended” (Haygood & Horwitz)”. With the inclusion of these sentiments, the media framing appeared to be tilted towards Trayvon Martin.

### **Conclusion**

An analysis of The Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case shows that episodic, thematic, and partisan frames were used in the news reports. *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago-Sun Times*, and *The New York Post* all reported this incident to a national audience.

This tale may never have received national exposure if it had not been immediately perceived as racially motivated by the news. If it weren’t for the subsequent combination of pressure from church leaders, civil rights groups, the president, and questionable media coverage, the case may have never seen a trial date. George Zimmerman was eventually acquitted and not charged with second-degree murder charges.

In this case, there seemed to be a rush to judgment. The social media surrounding the case ignited a fire that was kept alive and stoked by the media. News consumers jumped to emotional conclusions about what had happened without questioning the news frames. Prior to the trial, it appears that hardly anyone took the time to check the facts, especially the media who ran with the simpler narrative of racism.

Some of the earliest and most blatant examples of biased reporting that reinforced this narrative came from the big networks. For example, Zimmerman's 9/11 dispatch tapes were doctored by NBC to make it sound like he went out of his way and identified Trayvon Martin as black when he only answered the dispatchers question about Martin's race. George Zimmerman unsuccessfully sued NBC for editing the 911 call. (CNN)

ABC also ran a misleading piece when it aired video footage from security cameras that showed Zimmerman entering the police station for questioning after the incident. Based on the clip, ABC disputed Zimmerman's allegation that Martin had beaten him because he did not appear to be bleeding or have any obvious bruising. However, an enhanced version of the tape shows injuries to the back of his head. Police records also include photos of Zimmerman's facial injuries and note that the backs of his clothes were wet with damp grass.

The world is constantly evolving and the public often demands up-to-the-minute information. The sense of instant gratification one receives when being the first to break a story to friends or coworkers gives joy to those who find current

events thrilling. In these instances, people do not take the time to evaluate all sides of an issue and may easily buy into a trending story without questioning the media frames that influence our interpretation of that story. Yet, when media frames become less subjective, a story closer to the truth can be told. To better our world we must better our story telling for it is an art we can credit much of our memory to.

### **Future Directions**

Because of the magnitude of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case, future examination of media framing in the national newspaper articles is needed. Future academic study of this case will develop a better understanding of media framing, highlight new findings in the case, and provide greater insight into the implications the media framing of this case had on society.

Additionally, more media framing research would allow the audience to better defend themselves from the negative effects of media framing. Media framing is a part of our daily lives and there is the potential for authors to become greater masters of influencing their audience without their notice. More studies on how to aid in the removal of elements from media framing would benefit society.

The media framing implications of this case on the public may be impossible to prove. Cause- and- effect relationships are difficult to prove when dealing with a case of this scale. However, through in-depth research, media framing's impact may be easier to identify. As further tragedies occur in our world, understanding how the media frames the narrative will help bring readers the truth.

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## Timeline

### George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin Case

Cross referenced with News 13, ABC, CNN, and CBS.

#### Before The Trial

February 26, 2012

- Sanford police arrive at 1231 Twin Trees Lane after 911 calls report shots fired. Police find a male victim shot and killed.

February 27, 2012

- Sanford police identify 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and 28-year-old George Zimmerman.

February 29, 2012

- Sanford Police say George Zimmerman was “serving in the role of neighborhood watch” when the shooting happened. Police say Trayvon was visiting family friends in Sanford for the week.

March 8, 2012

- Trayvon Martin’s father holds a press conference in Orlando asking Sanford police to arrest Zimmerman for murder.

March 12, 2012

- Sanford Police Chief Bill Lee said at a press conference that the police department was not aware Zimmerman had a criminal record.
- The case gets handed over to state prosecutors who will make a decision if Zimmerman will face charges.

March 13, 2012

- Trayvon’s family calls on Sanford Police to release 911 tapes.

March 14, 2012

- Religious leaders gather at Allen AME Church in Sanford to discuss case.

March 15, 2012

- Florida Civil Rights Association calls on Governor Rick Scott to appoint a special prosecutor to look into the case.

March 16, 2012

- Family members hold second press conference asking police to make an arrest.
- Witnesses speak out.
- Sanford police release 911 tapes.

March 18, 2012

- Hundreds gather at the Titusville Courthouse urging the state attorney to file charges against George Zimmerman.

March 19, 2012

- FBI announces it is opening an investigation into the shooting.
- The Justice Department says they have opened an investigation into the shooting.

March 20, 2012

- Details emerge saying Trayvon was on the phone with his girlfriend minutes before he was shot.
- State Attorney Norm Wolfinger announced a Seminole County grand jury will review shooting.
- Rep. Corrine Brown and Sanford leaders meet with the U.S. Department of justice.
- Hundreds gather at an NAACP town hall meeting at the Allen Chapel AME Church in Sanford to gather support for the case.

March 21, 2012

- Sanford City Commission calls for the chief of police to resign,
- Trayvon's mother files paperwork to trademark the phrases "I am Trayvon" and "Justice for Trayvon".

March 22, 2012

- Rev. Al Sharpton holds a rally at Sanford's Fort Mellon Park to voice justice for Trayvon. Crowd estimated at 10,000.
- Sanford Police Chief Bill Lee temporarily steps down from position.
- State Attorney Norm Wolfinger steps down from investigation.
- Governor Rick Scott appoints attorney Angela B. Corey to the case.
- Governor Rick Scott forms a Task Force on Citizen Safety and Protection to review the "Stand Your ground" law and other rules.

March 23, 2012

- Deputies in Brevard County arrest 68-year-old John Stewart at his home for sending a threatening email to former Sanford police chief Bill Lee with subject: "Coming after you".
- President Barack Obama spoke out about the shooting saying the nation should do some "soul-searching to figure out how something like this happens".
- Sanford City Manager holds a press conference announcing new structure for police department. Introduces Captain Darren Scott and Captain Robert O'connor to lead department.

March 24, 2012

- Rev. Jesse Jackson arrives in Central Florida to join the calls for justice.
- Group called Real Talk: Real Answers holds a rally in Tampa to honor Trayvon Martin.

March 25, 2012

- Nationally televised interview with Joe Oliver, a friend of George Zimmerman, says Zimmerman cried for days after shooting and has gone into hiding.
- Rev. Jesse Jackson speaks at Eatonville's Macedonia Baptist Church encouraging Central Florida's youth to get involved in the case and calls for changes to Florida's "Stand your Ground" law.

March 26, 2012

- Trayvon's parents, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rev. Al Sharpton, and National Urban League President Marc Morial ask Sanford City Commission to arrest Zimmerman, fire the responding police officer, and stand to appeal the Stand Your Ground law.

- Sanford police confirm information from a leaked police report that Zimmerman had a bloody nose when officers responded to the shooting and that he told them Trayvon attacked him first. Also confirmed that Trayvon was suspended from school in Miami for marijuana.
- Acting Chief Darren Scott takes over the Sanford Police Department.
- Thousands gathered at a rally in Sanford marking one month since Trayvon was killed.

March 27, 2012

- 6 p.m. rally in Tampa planned at 34<sup>th</sup> Street Church of God, near where members of Trayvon's extended family live.
- The parents of Trayvon speak at the House Judiciary Committee on racial profiling and hate crimes in Washington, D.C.
- The city of Sanford officially hands over all case-related information and questions to the State Attorney in Jacksonville.

March 28, 2012

- New video is released showing Zimmerman being walked into the Sanford Police Department for questioning the night of the shooting.
- The NAACP announces a Saturday march in Sanford.

March 29, 2012

- Hundreds rally in Leesburg for Trayvon Martin and community unity.
- Spike Lee apologizes for tweet giving wrong address for Zimmerman.

March 30, 2012

- Trayvon's brother speaks.
- Zimmerman's brother appears on CNN's Piers Morgan show.

March 31, 2012

- Hundreds gather for NAACP Rally and March in Sanford.

April 1, 2012

- Thousands gather in Miami for a rally in memory of Trayvon.

April 2, 2012

- Enhanced surveillance video from Sanford police surfaces, showing Zimmerman may have sustained head injuries.
- Trayvon's family calls for a probe of Florida state attorney's office.
- A group of Dr. Phillips High School students stage a walkout protest.

April 3, 2012

- Florida state Sen. Chris Smith, D-Fort Lauderdale, announces task force to review Stand Your Ground law.

April 4, 2012

- Zimmerman's new attorney, Hal Uhrig, appears on CNN backing his client's claims that Trayvon attacked him first and Zimmerman had a legal right to defend himself.

April 5, 2012

- Letter from an anonymous Zimmerman family member surfaces saying Zimmerman is not racist. Had previously rallied on behalf of a homeless black man who was beaten by the son of a Sanford police officer.

April 6, 2012

- Group of students calling themselves “Dream Defenders” begins 3-day march from Daytona Beach to Sanford for Trayvon.

April 7, 2012

- United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navl Pillay calls for an immediate investigation into the Trayvon Martin case.

April 8, 2012

- Zimmerman’s personal website is registered.
- “Dream Defenders” meet with Sanford city leaders after completing their march.

April 9, 2012

- State attorney Angela Corey announces she has decided not to use grand jury in the Trayvon case. Grand jury would have met April 10.

April 10, 2012

- Attorneys Hal Uhrig and Craig Sonner confirm they are no longer attorneys for George Zimmerman.

April 11, 2012

- State attorney Angela Corey announces George Zimmerman will be charged with second-degree murder in death of Trayvon.
- Zimmerman turns himself in, and is booked into the Seminole County Jail.
- Mark O’Mara announces that he is Zimmerman’s new attorney.

April 12, 2012

- Zimmerman makes his first appearance in court. Arraignment set for May 29. Attorney says he will file for bond between now and then.

April 16, 2012

- Zimmerman’s attorney files papers requesting new judge.

April 19, 2012

- Community meeting in Sanford develops nine-point plan for moving forward.

April 20, 2012

- Judge grants Zimmerman bond at \$150,000.
- Zimmerman apologizes to Trayvon’s family.

April 23, 2012

- Zimmerman bonds out of jail, and is fitted with a GPS monitoring device.

April 24, 2012

- Zimmerman’s website set up to help raise money is disabled.

April 26, 2012

- Zimmerman’s attorney discloses that his client’s website raised \$200,000.

April 27, 2012

- Zimmerman’s attorney launches GZLegalCase.com as an official site for Zimmerman’s legal case.
- Judge says he will not rule on the money raised by the previous website until he learns more about the account that collected the donations.
- Judge denies a motion for a gag order on Zimmerman’s attorney.

May 1, 2012

- Gov. Rick Scott’s task force, led by Lt. Gov. Jennifer Carroll to examine Florida’s Stand Your Ground law, meets for first time.

May 4, 2012

- Former Colorado Springs police Chief Richard Myers takes over as interim police chief in Sanford.

May 8, 2012

- At an arraignment, Judge Kenneth Lester accepts George Zimmerman's not guilty plea. Zimmerman is not present.
- Zimmerman's attorney files a motion for continuance. Judge Lester sets the next hearing for August 8.

May 17, 2012

- New evidence released to public includes 183 pages of documents, new photos, audio recordings and surveillance video of Trayvon at a 7-Eleven shortly before he was killed.

May 23, 2012

- Investigators release an audio recording of Zimmerman at a Sanford City Commission meeting in January 2011. Zimmerman called what he saw during a ride-along with police "disgusting".

May 24, 2012

- Sanford police release surveillance video of Zimmerman at the police station three days after shooting.

June 1, 2012

- Judge revokes Zimmerman's bond ordering him to turn himself in within 48 hours. Prosecutors say he had more money than he and his wife previously testified having.

June 12, 2012

- Zimmerman's wife arrested on one count of perjury.

June 20, 2012

- Sanford city manager fires police Chief Bill Lee.

July 6, 2012

- Zimmerman walks out of jail after posting a \$1 million bond.

July 13, 2012

- Zimmerman's attorney files motion to disqualify judge.

July 18, 2012

- Zimmerman says what happened the night of the shooting was part of "God's plan" in interview with Fox News host Sean Hannity.

July 25, 2012

- Six witnesses identified, five named. One is a juvenile.

August 5, 2012

- Volunteers replace a memorial for Trayvon outside of subdivision after several were mysteriously removed.

August 7, 2012

- Judge grants defense's motion to continue Zimmerman's case. Hearing scheduled for October 3.

August 9, 2012

- Zimmerman's attorney announces there will be a Stand Your Ground trial.

August 13, 2012

- Defense attorney appeals to have Judge Kenneth Lester removed from case.

August 29, 2012

- Appeals court grants Zimmerman's request to dismiss Judge, saying he could be biased.

August 30, 2012

- Judge Debra Nelson assigned to Zimmerman case.

October 5, 2012

- Zimmerman considers suing NBC for defamation.

October 8, 2012

- Zimmerman's defense requests Trayvon's Twitter and Facebook posts.

October 9, 2012

- Zimmerman's mother speaks to Piers Morgan on CNN saying her son was portrayed in a bad light.

October 15, 2012

- Zimmerman's defense requests a senior judge to stand on issues of reciprocal discovery, and a third party to sit in on depositions with witnesses that have strong ties to the case.

October 29, 2012

- Judge denies state's motion for a gag order on Zimmerman's attorney saying one is not necessary for a fair trial at this time.

November 1, 2012

- Zimmerman's brother holds open question and answer meeting with Orlando journalists.

November 14, 2012

- Gov. Rick Scott's Stand Your Ground task force recommends no sweeping changes to the law after concluding its final meeting.

December 3, 2012

- New photo shows Zimmerman with bloody, broken nose on night of shooting.

December 6, 2012

- Zimmerman sues NBC for editing 911 call.

January 16, 2013

- Trayvon's mother calls for repeal of Stand Your Ground.

January 29, 2013

- Sanford named new police chief.

January 30, 2012

- Defense moves to delay Zimmerman trial.

February 1, 2013

- Prosecution does not want trial delay.

February 5, 2013

- Trial delay denied.
- Would have been Trayvon's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

February 26, 2013

- One year since the shooting.

March 26, 2013

- Zimmerman's defense releases witness list.

March 28, 2013

- Judge denies defense's second request to question Crump, the lawyer for Trayvon's family, regarding a deposition he took of "witness 8".

April 18, 2013

- Defense wants details of Martin's settlement with the subdivision that were kept private.

April 24, 2013

- State wants court to question Zimmerman

April 25, 2013

- 500 jury summons to go out soon.

April 26, 2013

- Defense wants enhanced 911 calls that claim to reveal it was Trayvon yelling for help.

April 29, 2013

- Zimmerman is ready to be questioned for last scheduled hearing before the June 10 trial.

May 6, 2013

- Defense questions 911 calls, wants new hearing.

May 9, 2013

- Defense wants jury to see shooting scene with their own eyes.

May 10, 2013

- Some jurors may be talking on social media too much.

May 13, 2013

- State motions to try to block Trayvon's school performance, social media accounts, and text messages.

May 14, 2013

- Analysis on who was screaming during 911 calls differ by experts.

May 28, 2013

- Trayvon's pot use, texts, and suspension from school banned from lawyers to talk about.

June 1, 2013

- 24 seats will be available by public lottery.

June 3, 2013

- Appeals court rules Crump can be questioned.

June 6, 2013

- Defense expert says it is not possible to match a voice on 911 call.

June 7, 2013

- Experts say though they assume the voice is of Trayvon, the audio is not sufficient to say for sure.

## **Jury Selection**

June 10, 2013-June 20, 2013

- 6 seated. All women.

## **The Trial**

June 24, 2013-July 12, 2013

**Verdict**

July 13, 2013

- Not guilty